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The World at Her Feet: An Exploration of the Experiences of Cultural Distance for Professional Female Footballers

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
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Sarah Gregorius
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Abstract

This research explores the experiences of five professional female football players from Australia and America who have spent time playing professional football in either South Korea or Japan. Qualitative data was collected from the participants through semi-structured interviews at, or near, the conclusion of their experience. Research participants' insights were added to by the researcher's own experiences of playing professional football in Japan. This exploration is an anthropological enquiry into the effect of playing professional sport in a culturally distant environment on a player's sense of identity and their perceptions of success. Analysis of interviews revealed that success is both personal and subjective, and cannot be judged solely on the traditional empirical measures of success in sport, such as wins and losses, goals scored, or trophies won. A positive sense of personal growth and development was also expressed by all the athletes in the study, demonstrating that the effects of playing and living in a foreign country extend well beyond the playing field.

Using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus alongside ideas drawn from occupational science, sports anthropology, and sociology, the findings show that cultural distance in a professional sporting context can both challenge and empower an individual in ways they often neither predict nor anticipate. This research contributes to an academic field that is relatively small, and demonstrates that sport can be an important domain where wider cultural and societal values are evident. This thesis illustrates the importance of acknowledging how players' experiences on and off the field influence identity, personal growth, and success as they negotiate cultural distance while playing in foreign environments. The findings in this research can help players, coaches, managers, and sports administrators better understand and consider these effects to implement integration programmes and frameworks for smooth transitions into football, and life, for players from different cultural backgrounds. This research provides a foundation for further research into sports anthropology and professional women's football, something that is vital as the popularity and participation in this global game continues to increase.

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